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ABSTRACT

The creation of a new reading program at a New Jersey elementary school can provide administrators with a lesson in trying to make major changes in schools. A reading specialist presented research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress indicating the need for a different approach to reading instruction, as shown by reduced reading performance among students in the middle elementary grades. During 1981-1982 an innovative reading program was selected, a workshop was held, pilot groups were established, a new program initiated by pilot groups was formed, and a formal proposal for the rest of the classes was written. In the spring of 1982 another workshop led by an experienced reading teacher provided demonstrations and discussion sessions. Literature was used as the core instead of as a supplement to the basal program. Trade books replaced basal readers and workbooks were replaced by group and individual projects related to the books. A newly formed leadership team and the administration provided support, while necessary materials, college courses, and attendance at workshops were funded. Details were worked out for organizing time, keeping records, reporting to parents, covering skills, evaluating materials, selecting classroom libraries, and adjusting the program to the needs of the student body. Although the program is fully operational and considered a success, administrators need to note these things about making a change: (1) trust needs to be established, (2) a need for change must be shown, and (3) a better alternative plan must be presented. (EL)

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WHY CHANGE? A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

In October I received a phone call from Dr. Strickland, my advisor at Columbia, she invited me to participate in these meetings explaining that I would be speaking to you as a classroom teacher who has experienced a major change in my teaching situation. After I hung up the phone I wondered why I didn't feel more excited about such an opportunity. It was flattering to think

I might have something worth sharing with you but I thought she had selected the wrong person. You see, I wasn't supportive of the changes taking place in my school, in fact I was very outspoken in my criticism of them. Wouldn't it be better to have one of my colleagues, who had been quick to see the potential of this new program speak to you, instead of me, the reluctant dragon? As time went by and I wrestled with this idea, I realized she had probably invited me because of my initial reluctance. Why did I offer so much resistance to something I now love? I've given this a great deal of thought and I've come to the conclusion that there might be a lesson in my struggle, a lesson for other teachers as well as for those trying to make changes in our schools. I'd like to go back a little and give you some of the background of this change I'm talking about.

One July day in 1981 I found myself seated across the desk from the head of my school. Seated next to me was the reading specialist who conceived this new reading program. There was an air of tension in the room as they expressed their fear that I -because of

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my position as gradelevel chairperson and senior faculty member- would sabotage their plans. Their thinking resulted from events at the end of the 1980-81 school year. The year ended with an emotionally charged meeting of the faculty. Several faculty members, but especially me, had spoken out emphatically against the change being implemented. The meeting ended with the decision, made by the school head, that a pilot group at each grade level would use the new approach to reading the following September. The results would be carefully monitored and a decision involving broader implementation would be made in the spring of 1982. Exactly who would make the decision wasn't clear.

"Why should I change what I have been doing successfully for many years?" That was the question I had the courage to raise. More burning questions welled up inside me but I dared not ask them. The unaskable questions were, "Why are you doing this?" "What are your motives?" "Does this change really represent progress in education or is it being done for political, empire building reasons?" "How is this program, which requires a great expenditure of time, energy, and money going to do the job better?"

Let me tell you a little about myself as a teacher because I think it will help you understand my delimma. I love teaching and I love teaching at Montclair Kimberley Academy (my school in New Jersey). When I started there as a member of the faculty, fourteen years ago, the school was very different. At that time MKA didn't exist, there were three separate school which merged in 1974.

During my time at the school I have worked under five different heads, taught three different grade levels and been housed in two different buildings. I've been through a lot of changes. But

none of them had caused such a spirit of rebellion in me. Important for the situation I am describing, is the fact that I feel a tremendous sense of responsibility for the children I teach. I firmly believe that teachers can have a lasting influence in the lives of their students and I consider it my moral obligation to provide them with the best program and best materials I can.

There is much evidence to substantiate the fact that I am a successful teacher. I am respected by my students, their parents, and my peers. I have worked hard to perfect my teaching. At this crossroads in my career, the point at which I was being asked to change, I was proud of my accomplishments.

In his book THE CREATION OF SETTINGS AND THE FUTURE SOCIETIES, Seymour Sarason points out a fallacy in society's concept of schools. The fallacy is that schools exist only for children. Schools are also settings in which professional adults hone and buff their craft. I am one of those professional adults, one who in 1980, after fourteen years of honing and buffing was asked to change. No longer would I use a published program, prepared by "the experts," from this point on I and my colleagues at MKA would create our own program, design our own activities, be totally responsible for the focus, scope and sequence of the reading program. If this was a "better" way it must mean that what I had done in the past was negated—that I hadn't really given my students the best possible program. This personal conflict engulfed me. I think other teachers who are asked to make significant changes struggle in similar ways. It is an important ingredient for agents of change to consider.

The following is a chronology of events which established the reading program now used at my school. These events initiated the

internal conflict I've described. Some of these events inflamed the conflict and others helped resolve it.

1979 (Spring) New School Head Appointed by Board of Trustees

The woman selected by the board of trustees to head the school (this is the same job as a superintendent in a public school) is a forceful, dynamic leader. In her opening address to the faculty she stated her goal- to create the best private day school on the East Coast. She has boundless energy and in the six years she has been head the school has changed dramatically.

1980 (Spring) Reading Specialist Hired by School Head

After spending a year becoming familiar with the school, its character and its problems, she hired a specialist to coordinate the reading program on all three campuses.

1980-1981 Faculty Meetings to Discuss Reading Program

The reading specialist spent a year looking at the program being used and meeting with department heads and grade level faculty. She presented research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress which indicated that children in the primary grades scored well on achievement tests, but in the middle grades these achievement scores made a dramatic turn down. This was an area of difficulty for me. The age group I taught was doing well and I didn't see the connection between this research which seemed to indicate difficulties in the middle grades with what I was doing. There is a connection but the way the information was presented didn't make it clear to me at this time and so the need to make a dramatic change in the program wasn't clear to me.

1981 (Spring) Reading Specialist Hired for Each Campus

Resources in my school, as with all schools are limited.

Whether to use those resources for administrative salaries or to use them to supplement classroom materials and teacher salaries was an issue among the faculty as these reading specialists were hired.

1981 (Spring) Address to Entire Faculty by Dr. Morton Botell

Dr. Botell is a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. In looking for an innovative reading program our reading specialist had familiarized herself with Dr. Botell's program and used it as the basis for her proposal. In his address to the faculty Dr. Botell presented the philosophy behind his program. The specific details of the program and how it would be used in the classroom were saved for the workshop to be held at the close of school..

1981 (June) Workshop for All Teachers Grades K-6

I looked forward to this workshop. I had a thousand questions about this program that were not answered by Dr. Botell. They involved nuts and bolts. The man answering questions was not a teacher, had never taught, and while he was very familiar with Dr. Botell's program he was not especially knowledgeable about the teaching of reading. As the workshop progressed an air of tension and hostility developed between the "expert" and the faculty. As I mentioned earlier the need to change has not been clearly established in my mind and this workshop did nothing to convince me that the program under consideration was better, if as good, as the one being used.

1981 (Spring) Pilot Groups Formed in Grades K-6

Establishing pilot groups became a very emotional issue. There would be a pilot group at my grade level, a mandate issued by the head of the school. Only one teacher volunteered to teach the pilot group, a teacher who had just been assigned to fourth grade for the coming year. She had previously been teaching kindergarten. In other words,

I didn't trust the motives of the change agents, the need to change was unclear, my first exposure to the program was negative, and the initial implementation was to be done by a teacher new to the grade level. I have already described the final faculty meeting, perhaps you can better understand the air of tension that existed

1981 (Summer) Paid Work Days for Teachers of Pilot Groups

Those teachers volunteering to implement the program in the fall of 1981 and the reading specialists worked intensively for five days after the close of school. They ordered materials, organized the curriculum, and discussed plans for classroom management. They were paid for this additional work.

1981-82 New Program Initiated by Pilot Groups

In September the pilot groups went into operation. Special memos were sent to parents informing them of the program. The teachers were well prepared and the program was impressive. A great effort was made to communicate to the rest of the faculty what was happening in those classrooms and teachers were encouraged by freeing their time to visit these pilot classes for firsthand exposure to the program.

For me this was a turning point. I could see before my eyes a wonderful thing happening. At my level the teacher was enthusiastic, the kids were extremely happy and productive and best of all students were becoming more and more involved in their own education. My reservations about this approach to reading began to melt away and I wanted to learn more about it.

1982 (Spring) Proposal for New Reading Program

At the end of the pilot year the reading specialist wrote a formal proposal. This year had been very successful in convincing

faculty, students, and parents that this approach to reading was educationally sound and more desirable than the program previously used.

1982 (Spring) Workshop-Demonstration by Associate of Dr. Botell

Another workshop was organized, this time with an experienced teacher of reading who was also familiar with Dr. Botell's approach. Through some very creative scheduling demonstration lessons were taught at each grade level with all faculty at that level present to observe. Immediately following these demonstrations all teachers had been freed to discuss the lesson and ask questions of the consultant. This workshop and the success of the pilot groups were what I needed to be converted. Supplementing the basal program with literature didn't have nearly the potential of this program which used literature as its core. Trade books replaced basal readers and workbooks were replaced by group and individual projects related to the books.

1982 (Spring) Leadership Team Formed

Through the spring and summer of 1982 there was tremendous support from the leadership team (those pilot teachers plus the reading specialists) and the administration. Funds were made available for the purchase of needed materials. Attendance at workshops as well as college level courses was paid for by the school. An atmosphere of sharing and a spirit of commitment to a cause developed. No question was too trivial, no doubt ignored, as everyone pulled together to solve problems like organizing time, keeping records, reporting to parents, covering skills, evaluating materials, selecting classroom libraries, and how to adjust this program to the special needs of our student body.

1982-83 Literature Based Reading Program Implemented

The reading program in my school has come a long way since 1982. It is fully operational at the primary school and making progress through the middle school grades. A colleague of mine at the upper school is on full sabbatical this year to work out plans for changing the focus on reading and writing at that level. He spent a considerable amount of time in my classroom and others at the primary school learning our program and how it could be adapted to the upper school. Later this spring, a workshop will be held involving faculty, consultants, and students from the upper school. It should be a very interesting workshop.

This is no longer Dr. Botell's program; it is unique to MKA. It has been supplemented with a special component in writing; it makes use of the computer as a tool in teaching language arts, and it has been integrated with social studies and other content areas. It has changed the atmosphere in the classroom from quietly, passive children accepting information from the teacher, to active learners making decisions and asking questions of themselves and others. It has redefined the role of the teacher from director of activities, checker of workbooks, and keeper of order, to facilitator, observer, one who provides strategies and confers with children to help them discover what they know and how they are going to proceed. It causes students to take responsibility for their learning. It's a great program, one of which we are proud. The faculty support system continues. There are weekly grade level meetings with the campus reading specialist, and monthly reports from the leadership team. Faculty development continues, and will continue, because the administration recognizes this as a critical ingredient of success.

Where is the lesson of this innovation? To many of you this

must look like a well orchestrated plan and it is. For me initially, three factor caused a break down of the system. First is trust. The school administration had not established rapport with those being asked to change. Although the head of the school was energetic and innovative she had not convinced me of her dedication to high educational standards. Now I understand what she was trying to accomplish but this insight took time to develop. She was in a hurry to improve the school and made decisions from the top down without involving the faculty and allowing ideas to evolve from the bottom up.

In her new book TEACHERS, THEIR WORLD AND THEIR WORK, Ann Lieberman writes,

"Teachers are at the core of any improvement effort. We must pay attention to their personal and professional concerns, and the ways in which they function as a separate culture in the school."

Leadership is essential to innovation but education doesn't happen in the superintendent's office; it happens in the classroom between teachers and students.

The second factor which in a way relates to the idea of trust, was the need to change. Conscientious teachers invest a tremendous amount of themselves in what they do. Mandating them to change dramatically, without firmly establishing a rationale is not likely to breed success.

And finally, once teachers see a need to change, they must be presented with an alternative, a better way.

Should I have overtly resisted the proposed changes? Was I presumptuous to question the motives of the change agents? The answer of course is yes, to both questions. And yet, if I had sat quietly back making no dissonance in the orchestration I would probably not be

as enthusiastic about this program as I am today. By airing my doubts, resisting the current of events, I called attention to these flaws: trust: the need to change: and a better alternative plan; in the implementation which otherwise might have gone unaddressed. That July meeting gave me the opportunity to verbalize my reservations and my professional conflict. I would not have sabotaged their efforts but I would not have put my time and energy into making the program a success. I have come to the understanding that acknowledging the merits of this new program does not negate what I did in the past. I was true to my craft then because I gave my students the best I had. Now, I've grown, I see there is a better way. Every day through their comments and actions, my students tell me this is a better way. One such incident happened recently. As the bell rang at the end of the school day, Robyn looked up from the book she was reading and said, "Mrs. Welsh, is it time to go home already?"

I just got started with this book and I don't want to stop yet!"

When you get to the bottom line its teachers who make or break a program; if they believe in what they are asked to do; if they are given opportunities to verbalize and resolve their professional conflicts; if they are supported, not dictated to, by the school leadership; and if they are sufficiently trained, the program will fly. If they aren't it will stop outside the classroom door.

Now I would like you to join me in my classroom for a brief visit via the wonder of TV. In the next ten minutes you will see some of this language arts program I have described in action. I think you will agree with me that this is something special.